AS A SCULPTOR, college professor, and Christian in the Catholic tradition, I often find myself in the position of translator between professional artists and those who might have had very little exposure to art. A number of years ago, I became involved in an interchange of letters in The Catholic Agitator, a newspaper published by the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, about a sculptural frieze encircling that city’s federal building, Called “The New World” and created by sculptor Tom Otterness, the relief presents a seemingly endless queue of chubby, cartoon-like figures, struggling to lift and carry huge spheres, cylinders, and cubes. One letter-writer dubbed it “the shame of L.A.,” calling it offensive and lamenting that neither the artist nor the patron had an “uplifting, aesthetic, or beautiful” image in mind.

I responded by agreeing that the image, with its Sisyphean depiction of labor based solely in the accumulation of wealth, was most certainly not uplifting or aesthetic. But I continued with a reminder that not all art is meant to convey the beautiful. One only has to look at medieval crucifixion scenes or Hieronymus Bosch’s depictions of hell. In more modern times, there were Francisco Goya’s etchings about the horrors of war, Picasso’s painting of the bombing of Guernica, or Käthe Kollwitz’s lithographs of starving children in Germany. These are all difficult artworks.

Artists are messengers. We report the news of this world; we don’t create it.

So, then, why does that great mass of Americans we like to call the “general public” (and, counted among them, many Christians) often get more riled up about artistic images than the “news” behind those images? Could it be because, by making touchy subjects visible, artists provide easily aimed-at targets? So easy to aim at, in fact, that the most vocal protesters often have never seen the actual artwork at which they are shooting? (A favorite cry is, “I don’t have to see it to know what it’s about!”)

I myself ran afoul of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights back in 1994 without even knowing it. The contemporary art gallery at the college where I teach was cited by the group for mounting an anti-Catholic exhibit. As manager of the gallery, I—along with a committee of other faculty members and students—had agreed to show the work of an Austrian artist named Josef Schützenhofer. Called “Arsenal of Democracy,” the paintings we chose used satire to take a hard look at the relationship between power and society. Figures such as George Bush Sr., Pat Robertson, Lee Iaccoca, and Pope John Paul II were all subjected to scrutiny. No one from the League ever contacted me or any members of the committee, and, consequently, the information listed in their report was filled with inaccuracies. In fact, I’m not convinced that anyone from the group saw the show. Interestingly enough, I had made a point of inviting the college’s Catholic campus minister to view the paintings, and he had no trouble understanding what the artist was trying to illustrate—namely, that power has the tendency to distort the worldview of those who possess it.

Was Schützenhofer’s statement so revolutionary? I don’t think so. Was no one from the Catholic League aware of church history? I don’t think so. Why is it that, in a tradition that honors prophets and saints who told the popes off to their faces, there are Catholics who recall at the slightest amount of criticism of their institutional structure? Maybe a picture really is “worth a thousand words.”

A MORE FAMOUS controversy surrounded the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. This time it wasn’t only the Catholic League protesting. For weeks, crowds gathered outside the museum, chanting and praying. Mayor Giuliani was ready to shut the museum down. Chris Ofili’s collaged abstraction of an African-featured woman titled “The Holy Virgin Mary” was at the center of the fray. The colorful image incorporated a resin-coated, clay-like form shaped like the kind of gravity-defying breasts one sees on the painted Madonnas of the Middle Ages. It turned out that the material used was dried elephant dung.

The New York tabloids had a field day. What in actuality is a very stylized rendering became transformed into “a portrait” of Mary on which an
Why do so many people—Christians among them—get so riled about artistic images?

Some of those who complained about the gory sculpture as being in bad taste would not level the same charge against the Goya etching. I suspect that time, familiarity, and the perception of what is now an archaic printing process as fine art (etchings were originally just a cheap way of mass-producing images) have made the subject matter of the inhuman acts that occurred during the French occupation of Spain more palatable. War is not pretty and—while the Chapman brothers might seem to be throwing that fact in our faces—perhaps we need to be reminded of it.

DON'T GET ME wrong. Not all artists who deal with uncomfortable subjects are doing so for high-minded reasons. I'm the first to admit that, sometimes, we like to play it both ways. We want publicity and most of us can't afford to buy the kind of advertisements that will bring crowds into galleries and museums to see our artwork. Andres Serrano's atmospheric image of a crucifix bathed in copper light did not have to be titled "Piss Christ" (the others in the series were not named in such a provocative manner). When Serrano expressed confusion as to why the general public was upset (as I heard him imply in a taped interview), he was being duplicitous. But he achieved his goal: The photograph has now been seen around the globe.

So why the fuss? Perhaps because visible manifestations of otherwise uncomfortable subjects sometimes touch us in ways we would rather not be touched. Images tend to condense and digest topics that often take a myriad of words to describe. Images hit us all at once. In self-defense, maybe some of us reflexively hit back. And, all in all, they are easier to see, easier to take aim at, than words.

Is this the only role of art? Of course not. But we need to understand that just as an artist might be inspired to give vision to our loftiest hopes and aspirations, she can, as well, be inspired to place our faults, squarely and unavoidably, before our eyes.

Virginia Maksymowicz teaches sculpture at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She makes large sculptural installations about political and social issues.